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Naira E. Sahakyan

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Framing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: an analysis of the narratives of the state leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey, 2002–2022

Naira E. Sahakyan 

General Education, American University of Armenia, Yerevan, Armenia

ABSTRACT

The modern phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has lasted for over three decades. Since the independent republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan emerged in 1991, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh has been at the centre of these countries' foreign and domestic policies. Using Robert Entman's theory, this article examines speeches about possible remedies to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey between 2002 and 2022 and identifies frames that these leaders create over the conflict's resolution. By enhancing our understanding of how state leaders frame their perspectives on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for external audiences, this article demonstrates the complex challenges in achieving a peaceful resolution. Understanding these framing strategies is crucial for comprehending the underlying motivations and interests of the involved parties and sheds light on the challenges faced in resolving the conflict through peaceful means.

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Introduction

Although the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh had roots in the early twentieth century, the modern phase of the conflict emerged in 1988, when ethnic Armenians demanded that what was then known as the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast be transferred from Soviet Azerbaijan to Armenia (Broers 2019; Cheterian 2008; Walker 1991). With the collapse of the USSR and the establishment of independent Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1991, the conflict became international, involving regional and international powers, including Turkey (Broers 2019; Cheterian 2008; Kaufman 2015).

Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey continue to fight over the status of this region. The narratives of these countries' leaders' play an important role in this conflict. They frame their perspectives in ways that conceal their political interests. How leaders of these countries frame their narratives about the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh – which means Mountainous Karabakh in Russian and now calls itself the Republic of Artsakh – and how to resolve it is a contributing factor of this conflict. The modern history of the Caucasus is shaped by conflicts in which the Nagorno-Karabakh region plays a significant role.

The leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey regularly mention the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, showing how significant an issue it is for each of their countries. In their narratives of the conflict, certain frames reappear. The story of how the conflict emerged often describes it as a result of historical injustice. The narratives include moral judgment of the situation and identify possible solutions, or proffer justifications of leaders' actions undertaken to solve the conflict. Drawing on Robert Entman's (1993) framing theory, this article considers how the state leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey discussed remedies for the Nagorno-Karabakh war between 2002–2022. I contend that the rhetorical aspects of the conflict and the narrative framings employed by these leaders to external audiences serve as a smokescreen, concealing the underlying political interests at play within their countries.

Scholars have been investigating the role of narratives in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for some time, identifying war narratives that predominate among different groups (Kopecek 2009; Papazian and Merlin 2018) and tracing their effects. Koolae and Khansari Fard (2020) examine the role of binary conflict narratives in shaping ethnic identity, showing how they escalate conflicts. In his investigation of Azerbaijani elite political discourse about the conflict, Tokluoglu (2011, 1247) claims that it has three dimensions:

First, group stereotyping and negative perceptions of Armenians; second, mistrust of all countries involved in the conflict, including Turkey; and third, an expectation that Western powers will recognize the injustices done to the Azerbaijanis and act accordingly during the peace process.

Importantly, she concludes that these three stances indicate elites' unwillingness to negotiate. The 2020 War prompted more scholars to consider the escalatory impact of the rhetorical strategies of Armenia's and Azerbaijan's political elites (Gamaghelyan and Romyantsev 2021).

Representational frames that circulate in the media are another focus of scholarship on the conflict. Artur Atanesyan (2020) examined media framings and found that there was a greater predominance of adversarial and violent images of war, and significantly less attention to 'peace perspectives' by journalists and media outlets. As Atanesyan points out, the non-democratic regime in Azerbaijan bans media framings that differ from official policy and punishes those who do not toe the party line.

Scholars have also examined the role that narratives about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have on the reconciliation process (Garagozov 2013). Armine Ishkanian et al. (2022) have found 'self-censorship and reticence among civil society actors' resulting from the combination of 'the liberal peacebuilding paradigm advanced by international actors and on the other hand, by hegemonic State and societal discourses about the conflict.' This has, they argue, limited these actors' abilities to contribute effectively to peacebuilding efforts.

In contrast to those accounts that focus on narratives circulated by and about conflicting sides, this article analyses the framing themes and tropes predominant in state leaders' official discourse about resolution remedies. Examining how leaders craft their narratives and frame the conflict for international consumption is crucial. It allows us to understand how they shape global perceptions, garner support and advance their geopolitical agendas. By considering discourse about Turkey's role in the conflict's resolution, I am able also to analyse the broader regional context and geopolitical dynamics, shaped

as they are by Turkey's legacy related to the Armenian Genocide and its support of Azerbaijan. It is essential to acknowledge that the Turkish approach, which is presented more succinctly in this article compared to the other two paragraphs, is grounded in specific actions and statements made by Turkish leaders when addressing conflicts in which Turkey is currently or aspires to be involved. For Turkey, this conflict represents just one facet of their broader narrative, making it a relatively minor element within their overarching narrative. Consequently, the third component of this research differs significantly from the Armenian and Azerbaijani approaches.

The article primarily focuses on analysing speeches directed towards external audiences, and therefore does not delve into the perspective of the Nagorno-Karabakh leadership. This limitation arises from the relatively infrequent opportunities the leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh has had to address such audiences. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge that the data pertaining to their perspective is not directly comparable in this context.

After outlining the theoretical and methodological frameworks for this research, I give a brief history of the modern phase of the conflict and then turn to discuss state leaders' framings of remedies within the context of their countries' foreign policy dynamics. The analysis also examines how the frames varied across different contexts and audiences. I conclude by discussing the implications of the analysis for understanding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Framing theory

Framing theory holds that 'how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by the audience' (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 11). This theory emerged from the fields of psychology and sociology in the 1970s (Pan and Kosicki 1993), and has since been used to analyse media and communication strategies (Boesman et al. 2015), and specifically communicative processes that shape the way we perceive and understand conflicts. As Entman (1993, 52) explains, the framing requires selection and salience:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

These frames highlight a certain part of the story 'thereby elevating them in salience.' Entman explains that frames usually have four primary components: defining the problem, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements and suggesting remedies. The process of framing is critical to the formation of this convenient fiction (Entman and Herbst 2000). If the audience of 'this convenient fiction' is already sensitive to the certain bit of salient information, then the communication might be convincing. In his other article, Entman (2003) goes further and demonstrates the spread of frames 'from the top level of a stratified system to the network of nonadministration elites, and on to news organizations, their texts, and the public.' This 'Cascading Activation,' as Entman put it, plays a significant role for the impact of frames on the public opinion.

As Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007, 12) state, framing operates at macro and micro levels. At the macro level, it is the complex of tactics that a communicator uses to

present information to audiences in a way that aligns with the audience's pre-existing schemas. At the micro level, framing refers to the ways that people use information and representations about certain topics as they form their opinions.

Framing theory has limitations, as critics have spelled out, highlighting especially its inability to account for how framed discourse affects its audiences. As Druckman and Nelson (2003, 730) argue, analyses of the effects of framing are based on surveys or laboratory experiments that stage unnatural contexts. For example, individuals are provided with a single frame and then asked to express their opinions. Typically, these studies do not involve any social interaction or exposure to alternative sources of information. 'Study participants thus find themselves in a social vacuum, receiving frames and reporting their opinions with no possibility to discuss the issue at hand.' Supporting Druckman and Nelson's critique are Sniderman and Theriault (2018), who demonstrated that competition between frames decreases their effect. Druckman (2001, 1045) concludes that there are systematic constraints on elites' use of frames 'to influence and manipulate public opinion'.

Another weakness of framing theory is its inability to account for the political judgement of audiences, which affects how open they are to being manipulated. Similarly, it does not adequately account for individual agency in the formation of frames. The audience members, particularly those with strong political beliefs, may have their own understandings and interpretations of frames that may contradict the communicator's intentions. Groups interpret frames in a variety of ways, influenced heavily by individual agency (Druckman 2001, 1044).

These important critiques of framing theory are mainly focused on the dynamics of audience perception, whereas the present study concerns the ways in which political leaders utilize framing techniques in their speeches over their suggested remedies of the conflict. It is worth noting that scholars who have developed framing theory have already explored various framing concepts within the realm of wars and conflicts (Knüpfer and Entman 2018). Notably, in 2018 the *Media, War & Conflict* journal dedicated an entire special issue to this topic, where framing theory was tested in the context of conflicts such as the Bosnian and Gaza wars (Hammond 2018; Manor and Crilley 2018). In my analyses, I also take their experience into consideration.

Methodological framework

My analysis of political leaders' framing tactics examines speeches made between 2002 and 2022. The year 2002 marked the beginning of a period of significant political change in the region. The Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) came to power in Turkey for the first time in November 2002. In 2003, Robert Kocharyan began his second term as President in Armenia after winning the election in February. In the same year, Aliyev, son of Heydar Aliyev, became the new president of Azerbaijan making it the first dynasty in the post-Soviet territories (de Waal 2003).

Likewise, the year 2022 also marked significant changes in the political and social landscape of the region following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict resulted in a new political reality with Azerbaijan regaining control of several territories previously held by Armenian forces. The war also brought about significant changes in the narratives and discourse surrounding the conflict, with

each side revising their interpretations of historical events and territorial claims. I extended my sample to include speeches delivered through 2022 to capture these significant changes as they continued to reverberate in political discourse.

In addition to public speeches made by the state leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey, I also analyse some of their interviews and press conferences.¹ The speeches examined in this article are mainly directed towards an international audience. I have focused on speeches directly addressing this contentious issue to attain a precise understanding of political leaders' perspectives, framings, and policies related to the Nagorno-Karabakh. To be as comprehensive as possible, I examined speeches as they were made in their original languages. I collected this material from various sources, including official government websites and media archives. To ensure accuracy and reliability, I cross-checked the speeches with multiple sources.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: a concise historical context

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has a century old history. The clashes between Armenian and Muslim groups that would later self-identify as Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh first erupted during the Russian Revolution of 1905–1907 shortly after the first nationalist parties had emerged on both sides. During the short existence of the first republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan between 1918 and 1920, several clashes, massacres and expulsions were carried out among members of these republics, deepening the conflict. At the beginning of the region's Sovietization in 1920 the Communist leadership of Azerbaijan briefly proclaimed its recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Soviet Armenia. However, in July 1921, after Stalin's intervention, the Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party designated the Nagorno-Karabakh as an autonomous region of Soviet Azerbaijan (Cheterian 2008, 89). The narrative of Stalin's intervention, however, is not clear. Arsène Saparov explains this decision with the Red Army's success in the region. As he insists, 'With almost all of Zangezur in Soviet hands the very reason why the Bolsheviks were prepared to grant the mountainous part of Karabakh to Armenia had disappeared' (Saparov 2012, 312). After the incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh into Soviet Azerbaijan, tensions between the two sides were usually suppressed by Moscow but they were not eliminated. Even during the Stalin era, Armenian representatives raised the issue, demanding unification, despite the repressive order. For instance, in 1936, the Armenian Communist Party's First Secretary, Aghasi Khanjyan, reportedly raised it in his communication with Moscow and was shot soon after that (Kaufman 2015, 51). The tensions in the region fluctuated, as efforts to resolve it were made and dissipated.

It was during Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* that the conflict intensified most publicly. At that time, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) had a population of 162.000 of whom 123.000 were Armenians (Nagornii Karabakh, Istoricheskaiia Spravka 1988, 7). In 1988, widespread demonstrations in Karabakh and Armenia shattered the region's stability and that of the USSR more widely. Demonstrations erupted on the streets of Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh on 13 February 1988. Initially, these demonstrations did not attract much international attention because of the wider turmoil in the Soviet Union (Smith 2013). However, when larger demonstrations took place in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh's status took on a far greater dimension as the instability of the region garnered

international attention and became a political worry for the USSR. The Nagorno-Karabakh Soviet (the main legislative body of the autonomous region) formally requested the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. Demonstrations began in Yerevan on the same day when the NKAO regional soviet adopted that resolution. This request, however, was rejected by Moscow almost immediately. Despite this rejection, the unprecedented act of making a formal request prompted anger among Azerbaijanis. The subsequent Azerbaijani-instigated pogroms against Armenians in the city of Sumgait, far away from Nagorno-Karabakh, left 26 Armenians and six Azerbaijanis dead, according to official reports (Hosking 1993, 475). Nearly the entire Armenian population of 18,000 people was driven out of the city. The conflict developed into one of the bloodiest wars in the post-Soviet territory.

During the First Karabakh war (1988–1994), Armenians achieved a military victory and took control of most of the territory of the NKAO and all the surrounding regions in Azerbaijan proper. The Russian-brokered ceasefire that was signed in May 1994 (Cornell 2011, 49) and lasted until 2016, did not yield complete tranquillity. Hundreds of Armenian military and some civilians were killed during periodic shelling. The Azerbaijani government did not issue numbers of Azerbaijani casualties for this period. What is often referred to as the Four-Day War began on 2 April 2016, when the Azerbaijani forces penetrated Armenian positions. Both sides lost hundreds of lives (Broers 2019, 1).

In the early morning of 27 September 2020, an Azerbaijani offensive reignited the conflict. More widespread than earlier clashes, this large-scale war lasted a month and a half and cost thousands of lives on both sides. On 9 November 2020, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, and the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, agreed to a ceasefire ending the hostilities. As a result of the Armenian defeat, the regions surrounding the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast were now put under Azerbaijani control. In addition, Armenians lost control of both Shushi (Shusha in Azerbaijani) and Hadrut, which had been considered part of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast until 1991. It was agreed that Russian ground forces would be deployed as peacekeepers along the new line of contact and the Lachin (Berdzor in Armenian) corridor linking Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh region for a minimum of five years.

Despite the agreement, tension persisted on the ground. Since 12 December 2022, dozens of Azerbaijani protesters, with support from the Azerbaijani authorities, blockaded Nagorno-Karabakh, rendering it inaccessible to civilian and commercial traffic. In violation of the November 9 Trilateral statement, Azerbaijan also established a checkpoint on the Hakari Bridge at the entrance to the Lachin corridor. Consequently, over 100,000 ethnic Armenians residing in the region were left without access to essential goods and services, including medicine and food supplies. Official rhetoric indicated that the primary goal of the Azerbaijani regime was to ethnically cleanse the region. This became a reality after approximately ten months of blockade when, on 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. Following the capitulation of the self-proclaimed republic, the Azerbaijani government opened the Lachin corridor, triggering the exodus of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, fuelled by fears of potential massacres.

During the blockade, several prominent organizations, including Genocide Watch, issued a genocide warning set in motion by Azerbaijan's unprovoked military attacks

on Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Luis Moreno Ocampo, the inaugural Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), articulated concern regarding this risk. He called the ten-month blockade and exodus of ethnic Armenians from the Nagorno-Karabakh a genocide. 'The blockade of the Lachin Corridor by the Azerbaijani security forces impeding access to any food, medical supplies, and other essentials should be considered a Genocide under Article II [...] Starvation is the invisible Genocide weapon' (Ocampo 2023a; 2023b).

Foreign policy approaches: framing conflict and utilizing diplomacy

International meetings are key locations where the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey created war narratives about Nagorno-Karabakh. These, like all countries in the modern world, strive through nation branding to project a specific image of their country that will make it a desirable trading partner, investment hub, tourist destination and political ally (Bolin and Ståhlberg 2010). Countries involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict also deploy specific frames as they seek to shape their national image to generate support from international audiences for their position in the conflict (Sahakyan and Brutian 2022).

Aliyev's approaches

Islamic solidarity. Between 2003 and 2022, Azerbaijan President Aliyev organized complex activities to gain the support of international actors, among which were Muslim-majority countries. He framed his discussion of the solution to the conflict as partially relying on the solidarity of the Muslim countries. Since 1991, Azerbaijan has made a concerted effort to position itself as being a crossroads between the West and the Islamic world while advocating Muslim solidarity. Aliyev emphasizes this idea especially in his speeches addressed to Muslim-majority audiences, in which he describes Azerbaijan as a member of the Muslim community and a defender and preserver of Islamic cultural heritage.

According to framing theory, if a piece of information or representation accords with the existing schemata in a receiver's belief system, it will be salient, and framing will be successful. Aliyev frames his discussions for Muslim-majority audiences using vocabulary that stresses the overlapping goals of Azerbaijan and the Muslim-majority countries. In particular, Aliyev refers to the importance of fighting Islamophobia, of dialogue with the rest of the world and of the preservation of Islamic heritage. Aliyev performs a two-step move in these narratives. First, he highlights the role of Azerbaijan in the Muslim world, often positioning Azerbaijan between the Islamic East and the West,² offering its services as a connecting link between the two. He then jumps to discussing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, often through demanding solidarity from the other members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), or by expression appreciation for that solidarity (Aliyev 2016; 2017b). In front of this audience Aliyev frames the conflict as being one in which Azerbaijan is a victimized Muslim-majority country and Armenia is the anti-Islamic aggressor. In demanding that Muslim-majority countries support Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Aliyev seeks the political isolation of Armenia, and calls for sanctions and resolutions condemning Armenia as an aggressor state.

Multiculturalism. As framing theory might predict, Aliyev's discourse changes in front of Western audiences, making multiculturalism a salient component in his framing (Filou 2021). On 11 January 2016, Aliyev signed a decree declaring 2016 the Year of Multiculturalism in Azerbaijan. In the same year, the International Centre for Multiculturalism was established in Azerbaijan with the declared intent being the promotion of a so-called Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism on an international scale. Throughout 2016, nearly every speech that Aliyev addressed to an international audience stressed that the year 2016 was the Year of Multiculturalism, and that multiculturalism is a state ideology for Azerbaijan. This idea was then repeated through Azerbaijani media, by political and social organizations and diplomatic representatives, and even by Azerbaijani financed or backed international journalists and authors (Akhundov 2020; Tase 2017). While crafting the image of Azerbaijan, Aliyev tries to emphasize that his country is an example of multiculturalism in which inter-religious dialogue has succeeded. He seeks to present the dual nature of Azerbaijan as being both multicultural and Muslim, which for Aliyev is key to establishing Azerbaijan as a needed connecting link between the Islamic countries and the rest of the world (Aliyev 2014; 2017a; 2019b).

What came to be considered a 'migration crisis' globally especially from 2015 also increased public references to multiculturalism across Europe as well as in Muslim countries. The discourse of multiculturalism simultaneously became a pillar of the Azerbaijani image, and Aliyev developed it further in his speeches in 2015 and 2017. Using the term and even naming it as a state policy, Aliyev sought to create a positive image of Azerbaijan as a tolerant state, and as a part of the European world (Aliyev 2014). In direct contrast, Azerbaijan tries to paint an opposing picture of Armenia, which Aliyev describes as a mono-ethnic and mono-religious country (Sahakyan 2022). The main goal for the Aliyev regime in representing the country as a multicultural state is to achieve support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Turkic heritage. In addition to courting the sympathy, non-interference and support of European and Muslim-majority countries, Aliyev has also worked to gain the cooperation of Turkic-speaking countries. Each speech addressed to this audience mentions the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Aliyev 2011; 2015; 2019a). Aliyev stresses an ethnic image of Azerbaijan as being a member of the Turkic family, and the importance of economic cooperation among them. Aliyev's narrative paints a picture of common history, culture and ethnic roots as a basis for shared concern and cooperation to achieve regional security and connectedness within the Turkic world (Aliyev 2015). Armenia's role in destroying those connections was a feature of Aliyev's discourse before the 2020 War, when he referred to the Syunik region of Armenia as a historic land of Azerbaijan. His argument was that the separation of this region 'from the rest of Azerbaijan and its accession to Armenia divided the great Turkic world geographically' (Aliyev 2019a).

After the 2020 war, the November 9 Ceasefire Statement between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia indicates that the continental part of Azerbaijan should be connected to Nakhichevan by the road running through the Syunik region of Armenia (Smbatyan and Isayev 2022).³ This became a key point in Aliyev's discourse regarding the unified Turkic world. In his speeches addressed to Turkic speaking leaders, including at the Summits of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States, Aliyev refers to the road as a way to restore unity (Aliyev 2022).

A special place among the Turkic countries, Aliyev of course gives to Turkey itself the influence which has always been crucial in the context of the conflict. For Azerbaijan, the support of Turkey in the conflict and the closing of the Armenian-Turkey border in 1993 has been crucial; it is a key part of the project to isolate Armenia from the rest of the world and prevent its development. Even when Turkey was seeking to gain EU membership in 2009 and agreed to normalize relations with Armenia, the interference of Azerbaijan consistently obstructed their efforts (Balci 2022; Vartanyan, Nigar, and Zaur 2022; Yinanç 2023). Aliyev has asserted that because the border between Armenia and Turkey was closed in 1993 because of the conflict, it should be opened only after the settlement of the conflict (Aliyev 2009). At the same time, however, Aliyev claims that the Armenian-Turkish border is an internal issue between these two countries. He mentions openly that this is part of his plan to keep Armenia isolated from the world, i.e., to keep Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey closed (Aliyev 2010). The process was blocked then. However, it would be naïve to claim that the sole reason for the failure to normalize relations was Azerbaijan. Turkish relations with the EU deteriorated and one of the key reasons to normalize those relations was eliminated. In this context, Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan gains even greater influence.

Armenian leaders' narratives

Democracy vs Autocracy. In contrast to Aliyev's emphasis on the shared interests of his country with Muslim, multicultural European and Turkic countries, the President of Armenia Robert Kocharyan's narrative contains frames on Armenian democracy in contrast to the authoritarian regime of Azerbaijan. Kocharyan has discussed Armenia's fight against corruption and other activities undertaken to strengthen democracy in the country (Kocharyan 2004). While Kocharyan was talking about democracy as something that should be established in Armenia, the third President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan was sure that Armenia had become a democratic country. A couple of months before his resignation, in the Council of Europe Sargsyan said that Armenia was aware that building and strengthening democracy would not be easy (Sargsyan 2018). He added that 'through political will and joint constructive engagement, we managed to overcome numerous obstacles and to achieve profound reforms'. This discourse was further stressed by the Prime Minister⁴ of Armenia, Pashinyan, in his address to the Assembly of the Council of Europe where he stated that 'Armenia is today unequivocally a democratic country with absolute freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, and our government is continuing to enhance respect for human rights' (Pashinyan 2019).

While crafting the image of Armenia as a democratic country, the leaders of Armenia use the same rhetoric for the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as well. To prove that the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) can be an independent member of the international community, leaders point to its democratic nature, which makes it impossible to live under Azerbaijan's dictatorial regime (Pashinyan 2020b; 2020a; Sargsyan 2023, 254). Sargsyan suggested that being forced to be a part of Azerbaijan will be tantamount to the restoration of colonialism (Sargsyan 2023, 93). To prevent this, Armenian leaders point out, the NKR has established democratic institutions and is ready to be integrated into the international community (Kocharyan 2002; Sargsyan 2023, 93, 243). In this context, Armenia and the NKR are

represented as civilized places, and as such, the international community should support a civilized solution of the conflict (Sargsyan 2023, 299, 313).

Regional cooperation. The second significant frame that Armenian leaders deploy is the image of Armenia as a strong supporter of regional cooperation. That regional cooperation could become a basis for conflict resolution has been a theme repeated by Kocharyan, Sargsyan and Pashinyan. This is portrayed as an important step to normalizing relations with neighbours and solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The key idea is that cooperation should establish trust and that trust is the basis for solving the conflict. For example, Kocharyan describes the Armenian approach as ‘solving the problem through cooperation’. He contrasts this cooperative stance to that of the Azerbaijani side, where ‘there can be no talk of cooperation until the conflict is resolved’. The Armenians are convinced, Kocharyan has said, ‘that through cooperation we can create a more favourable atmosphere for making decisions and implementing them both in Armenia, NKR, and Azerbaijan’ (Kocharyan 2002).

Kocharyan mentions a wide spectrum for potential cooperation: from synchronization of legislation to restoring the interconnected transportation systems to joint projects in the energy sector (Kocharyan 2004). He describes it in terms of regional ‘complementarity’, saying that such an approach ‘is based on the concept of seeking advantages in softening the contradictions of the global and regional powers, and not in deepening the gaps’ (Kocharyan 2004). Kocharyan (2006) points to intersecting value systems, economic interests and security interests as unifying forces between Armenia and other countries of the region. Whereas ethnic conflicts are a dividing force, Kocharyan seeks to focus attention on the forces and projects that can unify:

We need efforts in the direction of harmonization of reforms, unification of trade regimes and transport tariffs. Joint investment programs in the region’s infrastructure are needed. First of all, it is the energy and transport projects that cover the entire Black Sea basin and increase its economic attractiveness.

This is what can create a basis for trust and a resolution of conflicts, including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. ‘In this context, we are ready to continue the dialogue with Azerbaijan in the direction of settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and establishing relations with Turkey without preconditions’ (Kocharyan 2006).

The same approach is advocated by Serzh Sargsyan (2023, 137, 177, 305). ‘Regional infrastructures should be used effectively in the context of cooperation’ (Sargsyan 2023, 27). In the context of ‘football diplomacy’,⁵ Sargsyan often stresses that relations with Turkey should not be conditioned by Armenia’s relations with Azerbaijan (Sargsyan 2023, 75). After 2020’s disastrous war, Pashinyan also mentioned the importance of regional cooperation and communications. ‘The interconnected transport arteries of the region will be an outcome of resolving this issue. Opportunity will be created for establishing economic ties, which is one of the important prerequisites for peaceful development’ (Pashinyan 2021).

Turkish leaders’ perspectives

While for Armenia and Azerbaijan the conflict shapes their main narratives, Turkey’s framing of the remedies of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a more minor narrative

within Turkish discourse about its role in the region. In the Turkish leaders' speeches, several key components reappear in their framing of remedies.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is portrayed as one among other regional issues that Turkey can and will seek to solve (Erdogan 2020; Erdoğan 2009; Gül 2010). In a speech to the UN, the Turkish president described the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as one among others, from Kosovo to Crimea to Kashmir. The Nagorno-Karabakh is often referred to as being part of the problematic region of the South Caucasus, together with Ossetia and Abkhazia. In all cases, according to Turkey, territorial integrity should be the basis for resolution, whether in Azerbaijan or in Georgia. Their peaceful resolution must be achieved, because 'frozen conflicts ... continue to jeopardize regional peace and stability in the South Caucasus', said then-prime minister Erdoğan (Erdoğan 2007).

Turkish President Gül also focused on territorial integrity – but not self-determination: 'I sincerely believe that a positive perspective thus created will help to solve frozen conflicts, including occupied Nagorno-Karabakh, on the basis of respect for the principle of territorial integrity' (Gül 2008). As President, Erdoğan echoed this in 2017, saying:

Turkey will continue to do its part to ensure that peace, stability and well-being prevail in this exceptional part of the world. The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia is the key to regional stability in the southern Caucasus. Therefore, we need to work harder towards the resolution of the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Erdoğan 2017).

In many aspects, the Turkish presidents' rhetoric duplicates that of Azerbaijani president Aliyev. The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is important for Turkey, which has its own problem in the Kurdish campaign for self-determination. Fulfilment of the Armenian demand for sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh would set a bad precedent that Turkish leaders would seek to avoid (Özpek and Mutluer 2016; van Veen, Yüksel, and Tekineş 2020).

In addition, Russian-Turkish relations are an important part of the context shaping Turkish attitudes towards Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as Georgia. Russia and Turkey are involved in an ongoing contest for influence over the Caucasus (Aydın 2020; Bechev et al. 2018; Torbakov 2010). Turkey is invested in the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan that would decrease Russian influence in Azerbaijan. Thus, Turkish support of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan as well as Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) should be examined in the context of the Russian-Turkish relationship and their ongoing confrontation for the influence over the Caucasus. This explains the framing of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in line with other conflicts where the Russian side plays a significant role.

Conclusion

Colliding narratives and perspectives have long been a feature of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Drawing upon Entman's framing theory, this analysis has demonstrated how framing powerfully shapes leaders' narratives about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The differing frames employed by Azerbaijan's president and Armenian leaders, coupled with strategic representations of Turkey's involvement, contribute to the complex dynamics of the conflict. Understanding these framing strategies is crucial for comprehending the underlying motivations and interests of the involved parties and sheds light on the challenges to resolving the conflict through peaceful means. These strategies

shape the narratives and perspectives of the parties involved, contributing to the complex dynamics of the conflict. These framing strategies not only shape public opinion and garner domestic support but also influence policy decisions and actions taken by the respective governments.

Azerbaijan brands itself differently in front of different audiences: as an advocate of Islamic solidarity, of multiculturalism or as a member of the Turkic family. Aliyev uses these frames to make his messages resonate with the distinct value systems of his audience. He stresses multiculturalism when he addresses a Western audience that prioritizes ethnoreligious tolerance. Aliyev's criticisms of the Minsk Group and his deployment of a frame of the victimized Azerbaijan that suffers from mediators' 'double standards' justify his readiness to cut the negotiations and launch a war. Through systematic references to the military solution, Azerbaijan's president establishes a frame that emphasizes the preparation for war and weakening of Armenia. This reinforces the narrative that justifies military aggression.

Conversely, Armenian leaders prioritize negotiations and compromise, yet maintain a maximalist position, advocating self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh. They frame any defensive action as a response to Azerbaijan's coercion. At the same time, Armenian leaders emphasize the democratic nature of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh as opposed to authoritarian Azerbaijan, a frame they deploy to justify self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh.

Both Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders strategically refer to Turkey's role in the conflict, albeit with different intentions. Azerbaijan views Turkey as a means to isolate Armenia, whereas Armenia perceives improving relations with Turkey, or at least non-interference, as a crucial step toward trust-building and conflict resolution. Turkey, positioning itself as a staunch ally of Azerbaijan, leverages the conflict to reintegrate itself into South Caucasus regional politics. Turkey's leaders question the objectivity of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group to pave the way for Turkey's involvement in negotiations.

Utilizing diverse narrative frames, the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey have presented their perspectives on the conflict, offering potential remedies that align with their respective political interests. As these leaders navigate the complex dynamics of the conflict, their narratives serve as powerful tools to advance their political interests while shaping the discourse surrounding potential resolutions.

My analysis demonstrates how pivotal these state leaders' framing strategies around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are. The contrasting frames contribute to the dynamics of conflict, revealing their conflicting motivations and interests. They show just how complex are the challenges in resolving the conflict through peaceful means.

In addition to the comprehensive analysis provided above, it is obvious that Azerbaijani framing strategies have seen a higher degree of success when compared to their Armenian counterparts. Azerbaijani frames, adapted for different audiences and underpinned by economic and security cooperation efforts, have yielded tangible results such as noninterference of these target audience countries during the 2020 war. The emphasis on multiculturalism, Islamic solidarity and alignment with the Turkic family has allowed Azerbaijan to establish a versatile narrative that resonates with a variety of international actors. At the same time, Aliyev's strategic use of frames, such as victimization due to perceived 'double standards' of international mediators, has garnered domestic support and justified military action when deemed necessary. This blending of

framing techniques with concrete economic and security initiatives has bolstered Azerbaijan's position in the conflict.

On the contrary, Armenia's framing, while centred on democratic principles and self-determination, has encountered greater challenges in translating into tangible gains. While these values hold significant weight in international discourse, they have not been as effectively coupled with diplomatic and economic cooperation initiatives. This relative lack of accompanying measures has hindered Armenia's ability to garner substantial international support and has contributed to a less influential role in shaping the narrative surrounding the conflict.

Notes

1. I did not include other forms of communication, such as private conversations or official documents.
2. Indeed, with some Western countries Azerbaijan has special relations, however, here I will not divide the West given that the key actors that Aliyev mentions in his speeches are the EU, Council of Europe and the UN. Further division of these groups would make the research deeper but that is outside of the scope of this article.
3. Aliyev refers to it as a corridor trying to equalize its functions to that of the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, unlike the official agreement, which calls it a road ('The Agreement between the Leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan' 2020).
4. In December 2015, the country held a referendum which approved the transformation of Armenia from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary republic. That is why Sargsyan and Kocharyan served as Presidents of Armenia, while Pashinyan currently holds the position of Prime Minister, following a change in Armenia's political system.
5. In September 2008, Turkish President Abdullah Gül made history by becoming the first Turkish leader to visit Armenia. This significant event was prompted by an invitation from Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan to attend a FIFA World Cup qualifying match between the Turkish and Armenian national football teams. The visit by Abdullah Gül, along with the subsequent process of improving relations between the two countries, is commonly referred to as 'football diplomacy'. The normalization process was not successful. After the 2020 Karabakh War the new phase of normalization process was launched. After the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquake, on 11 February, a border crossing between Armenia and Turkey opened for the first time in 35 years, to allow Armenian humanitarian aid through after a massive earthquake hit the region. This new development is known as 'earthquake diplomacy' (Geybullayeva 2023).

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ORCID

Naira E. Sahakyan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8595-7044>

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